

Erasing The Long Silence in Shashi Deshpande's

That Long Silence

Dr.Kavya B
M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Lecturer in English
Govt. Pre-University College
Gabbur, Deodurga Taluk
Raichur

“The greatest hazard of all, losing one’s self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly.”

-Soren Kierkegaard

The present paper titled “Erasing The long silence in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*” aims at studying the novel by applying some of the themes of existentialism. Introduction to the paper is with the brief note on the theories of existentialism. Existentialism can be defined as the philosophy of man with his entire struggle to live and know the meaning of his living. The well-known existentialist thinkers are Karl Jaaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Satre. Jean Paul Satre is considered as the pioneer of existentialism. The philosophy of existentialism is not that easy to comprehend and different thinkers have their own opinion. According to Kierkegaard, ‘existence cannot be represented in a concept, “because its too dense, concrete and rich. I am; and this fact that I exist is “so compelling and enveloping a reality that it cannot be reproduced thinly in any of my mental concepts, though it is clearly the life-and-death fact without which all my concepts would be void”. Another eminent existentialist says, “That man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up the world- and defines himself afterwards”.

The body of the paper deals with the protagonist’s silence, its roots and factors contributing to the doom of individual identity. For seventeen long years of her life,

Jaya allowed her family to possess her body and soul. She didn't think anything apart from that, thus she was a dedicated bourgeois woman. All had their lives, but she gave up hers, she could neither express herself nor achieve anything. Jaya was leading a life without any purpose. Absurd is the word used by the modern existentialist writers to denote the meaningless living of man. The conclusion is verification of the relevance of the arguments, throwing light on how silence strengthens men in maintains high position and weakens women. Women indulge in silence; get tied their tongue with the fear of loss. It is a psychological abuse. Sartre rightly says, "Man first of all exists, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards. A man as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because he is nothing. He will not be anything until later and then he will be what he makes himself. Man is not what he conceives to be, but he is what he wills and makes of himself." Jaya had an illusion of happiness. She accepts that she should let that illusion go. "I had to admit the truth to myself-that I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending monotony." (4) Jaya on her way to introspection is aware of the essentials of the critical analysis and self-detachment. Jaya always expected a change she had sighed for a catastrophe, a disaster that could pull her out of dull routine. Her self-analysis revealed her own flaws and she gradually prepared herself for facing the reality. Silence is seen as an image of subjugation, alienation, absurdity of Jaya's existence. Erasing that long silence, she evolves as a confident and independent being.

Introduction -

"The greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly

in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly."

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Shashi Deshpande's works concentrate more on the status of the women in the traditional bound, male-dominated middle class society of the contemporary

India. Her heroines are sensitive, intelligent and career-oriented. Study of her novels reveals how poignantly, she expresses the frustration and disappointments of women who experience social and cultural oppression in the male-dominated society. Shashi Deshpande started her writing career all of a sudden. In her own terms: "There was really nothing. It was very strange. May be it was there waiting inside and suddenly at one moment, it came out. Until then, I was looking around to see what I could do. I was very unhappy not doing anything, just looking after the home and children. It was perhaps a kind of claustrophobic existence. I could feel something building up in me and that caused the outburst. Otherwise, it would have perhaps led to a breakdown." ("Denying the otherness" II) Her novels are autobiographical in nature depicting her own experiences of the educated middle class Indian women's predicament and they tend to be gender specific. *That Long Silence* is a saga of suppressed women prisoned in the room of silence. It is Jaya's journey in search of one's true self who confronts the gender oriented traditional speculation. This paper tries to apply some of themes of existentialism to narrate Jaya's psychic journey of selfhood. Existentialism can be defined as the philosophy of man with all his struggle to live and know the meaning of his living. The well known existentialist thinkers are Karl Jaaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Satre. Jean Paul Satre is considered as the pioneer of existentialism. The philosophy of existentialism is not that easy to comprehend and different thinkers have their own opinion. According to Kierkegaard, 'existence cannot be represented in a concept, "because its too dense, concrete and rich. I am; and this fact that I exist is "so compelling and enveloping a reality that it cannot be reproduced thinly in any of my mental concepts, though it is clearly the life-and-death fact without which all my concepts would be void". Another eminent existentialist says, "that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up the world- and defines himself afterwards".

For seventeen long years of her life, Jaya allowed her family to possess her body and soul. She didn't think anything apart from that, thus she was a dedicated bourgeois woman. All had their lives, but she gave up hers, she could neither express herself nor

achieve anything. Jaya was leading a life without any purpose. Absurd is the word used by the modern existentialist writers to denote the meaningless living of man. According to Heidegger, Being is Being-in-the-world. He considers it the ground of existence; it is “the ‘inner light, that illumination through which we become conscious of our meaning, or of our existence, or existence itself’”. Jaya suffered silently in the name of family. Marriage is still a social necessary, where women seek security and men respectability. As Eva Figes says: “Dominance is ...the keynote in an analysis of the man-woman relationship where the male attributes are ones associated with mental thought and positive activity, whilst the woman is regarded as essentially passive, her role to be the respectable of male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species. Jaya, the protagonist, is a sufferer right from her childhood day’s, which continues even after marriage. She nurtured shame because she could not respond and admire the classical music of Paluskar and Faiyaz Khan like her father. Her grandmother has continuously chided her for her inquisitive nature and further cautioned her saying that “for everything question for everything a retort what husband can be comfortable with that?”(5). She is further cautioned that “a husband is like a sheltering tree” (137) and that “the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you” (138). These tips of Vanitamami for a future wife became foundation of Jaya’s married life. This reveals how women are viewed in the society controlled by men and the tradition. Jaya wanted to confront security, she accepted Mohan as a sheltering tree that is why she did not bother to know if he was following shortcut ways for earning money. Ever since her marriage she had been content to follow the footsteps of the mythological role model of Sita, which authorities tend to sacrifice at one instance and she tries to compare herself with Gandhari: “If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I don’t want to know anything. It was enough for me that we moved to Bombay; that we could send Rahul and Rati to good schools, that I could have the things we needed – decent clothes, a fridge, a gas connection, travelling I class.” (144).

In orthodox Indian marriages, it is not enough for the husband to be approved and admired; he wants immediate unquestioned obedience to his commands. Women are trained to follow her husband mutely. This is clearly witnessed in the case of Mohan's mother. As narrated by Mohan to Jaya "I can see a picture of extraordinary clarity and vividness-the woman (Mohan's mother) crouching in front of the dying fire sitting blank and motionless, the huddles bundles of sleeping children (Mohan, his brothers and sisters) on the floor, the utter silence, the loud knock at the door ... They had all had their food, except her. Though she always waited for him, their father, however late, he was (and he never gave her any indication of when he would be back) she had asserted herself in this that she would not make the children wait for him. She gave them their dinner, even the older ones and then she cooked rice for him again, for he would not, he made it clear to her, what he called food as, "your children's disgusting leaving," He wanted his rice fresh and hot, from a vessel that was untouched. She had just finished cooking this second cooking and was waiting, hoping, perhaps that he would not be too late, for it wouldn't do to allow and as for lighting the fire again, that was unthinkable" (P.15-16). At last, when he came in, he went straight to the bathroom to wash. By the time he returned, she had his plate ready. Hanging his shirt on a peg on the wall, he Sat down, drank a glass of water, poured some water into his palm to sprinkle ritually around his plate and then he paused, "Why is there no fresh chutney today?" he asked, not looking at her. She mumbled something, the next second, he picked up his heavy brass plate and threw it, not at her, but deliberately on the wall, which it hit with a dull clang. He wore his shirt and went out of the house. This is silently watched by the children, the mother silently picks up the plate, cleaned the floor and the wall of all the spattered food, and wiped it, she once again cooked rice and prepared fresh chutney, and sits clown to wait, when her children, who had awoken up by the clanging sound of the plate, finally drift off to sleep again, "She was still sitting there in front of the fire, silent, motionless" (36). Mohan's reaction after his narration is quite revealing. "God... She was tough. Women in those days were tough" (36). But Jaya sees a 'wounded woman'. Mohan is so insensitive that as a son, being witness to his father's harassment is not condemning his father, but

praising his mother as a virtuous woman. Mohan's sister Vimala too dies in silence rather than informing her mother-in-law about her problem, victim of ovarian tumour. If Vimala would have expressed herself it would have been in vain, that could be confirmed by her mother-in-law's response towards her ill health. "God knows what's wrong with her, she has been lying there on her bed for over a month now. Yes, take her away if you want to. I never heard of women going to hospitals and doctors for such a thing. As if other women don't have heavy periods. What a fuss. But these women who have never had any children are like that." (89). At last, she killed herself. Silence, in a way becomes a symbol of high endurance on the part of a person who is silent. "Her Ajji along with silence had taught her to "wait" the waiting game"(30) For a man waiting brings in restlessness but for woman the game of waiting starts quite early in her childhood "wait until you get married, wait until your husband comes, wait until you go to your in law's home, wait until you have kids. Yes, ever since I got married, I had done nothing but wait" (30) Women are blamed unfeminine and unnatural if they break the rules of patriarchy so they are forced to cling to be termed feminine.

Shashi Deshpande provides perfect examples of victimized women in a patriarchal system. Jeeja, Jaya's maidservant supports her good for nothing husband by all means. She does not protest him for getting her co-wife, in turn, she justifies it by saying, "God didn't give us any children. That was his misfortune as well as mine. How could I blame him for marrying again? When I couldn't give him any children? After the death of her husband and his mistress, she willingly brings up their son, Rajaram and looks after his wife Tara. Jaya does not allow even Tara to abuse or curse her husband. She says, "Stop that don't forget he keeps the kumkum on your forehead. What is a woman without that? (53)". Then there is Kusum who is an adopted girl by the childless Vanitamami. In a letter informing Jaya of Kusum's death, her mother writes: "But it was a good thing in a way. She was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her." After reading the letter Jaya tears it furiously. Kusum's madness and the way she committed suicide by jumping into the dry well depicts her insecurity

as she failed in one of her goals, a male child – the winning of man’s heart, his long life and the propagation of his lineage through a male child are the goals of the traditional married woman. Mukta is Jaya’s immediate neighbour at her Dadar’s flat who tortures herself by fasting, ‘If it wasn’t her ‘Saturday’ it was her ‘Monday’ or her ‘Thursday’. Jaya’s reaction towards her piety: “Mukta had more days of fasts than days on which she could eat a normal meal. Her self-mortification and reproach seemed to be the most positive thing about her. And yet her piety – surely it was that which prompted those fasts – seemed meaningless, since she had already forfeited the purpose of it, the purpose of all Hindu woman fasts – the avoidance of widowhood”. Even Jaya’s Vanitamami falls into this category of performing numerous *Pujas* and fasts in the hope of getting a child. “But she had gone on with her fasts, her ritual circumambulations of the Tulsi Plant of the Peepal tree, even when their aim had gone beyond her reach, when her uterus had shrivelled and her ovaries atrophied.” (67).

Jaya, Jeeja, Mukta, Vanitamami, Vimala and her mother’s story depicts the plight of Indian women who suffer in silence. It shows how prescribed norms of the society are powerfully embedded in the female consciousness and her failure to surmount orthodoxy. Even today, women strongly cling to the various forms of female oppression, exalting and glorifying them with the proactive norms of their life. Jaya, too tries, her level best to imbibe the tradition of silence of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, by enacting role of a devoted wife and dutiful mother, but the role playing is not as natural as it should have been, the cracks are soon visible. Once, she cannot control her anger, retorts back at Mohan, paying back his anger in the same measure-“ Then, getting the feel of it, I had met his anger with my own, deliberately using it as a weapon, raging, furious- I had flung accusations, wildly at him”(1). Jaya’s absorption into the family fold and tradition is so total that from a fiercely independent girl, she gradually deteriorates into that a “stereotype of a woman, nervous, incompetent always in hand of help, wanting to build an edifice of security around her husband and children, believing it to be a burrow into, to which she can crawl like a reptile and feel safe. (148) The very thoughts of the collapse of her

marriage, particularly those fears relating to the possibility of Mohan's death, keep constantly haunting her. Fear or anguish is one of the pivotal themes of Existentialism. Jaya's married life has been lived on the same life of the wise sparrow, who built a home of wax and the foolish crow, who built her house of dung. Thus, marriage means- to be at home, to take care of the children and the husband and to be away from the rest of the world. She has "Attending to the needs of the husband and tending and caring of the children becomes her full—time occupations she recalls in unequivocal terms that, "Mohan is her profession, career and means of livelihood".(75) Even faithfully she followed all the edicts laid down by the women's magazines. Jaya says, "And when I had been praised for anything, I'd been so ridiculously pleased, 'I almost wag my tail, like a dog that's been patted by its master.'"(84)

Jaya even sacrifices her creative writing for her insensitive husband. In the early years of her marriage, she was on the threshold of acquiring some merit. One of her short stories bags the first prize and is published in a magazine, which is about "a couple, a man who cannot reach out to his wife except through her body". Mohan thinks that the story portrays their own personal life, and he is very apprehensive of the idea that people may assume that he is the kind of person portrayed in the story. His words were enough to nip her creative writing in the bud. She says, "Looking at his stricken face, I had been concerned. I had done him wrong. And I stopped writing after that" (144). Even though she knew Mohan was wrong in his thinking she never dared to reason it out. Instead, she turned towards popular writing and wrote for a Woman's Magazine under the pseudonym of Seeta (In Indian mythology, Sita stands for total self-surrender. Sita and Savithri were strong and individualistic women but their energies were directed not towards self-liberation but towards the welfare of their husbands). Jaya is shocked when Mohan defended himself by saying, "It was for you and the children that I did this, I wanted you to have a good life. I wanted the children to have all those things I never had"(19). She now realized that the seventeen long years of her married life had failed to make them one emotional, intellectual, only

their physical bodies had occasionally met, not their souls, “We were two persons, A man, A woman” (8) Jaya, fails to identify her identity and doesn’t enjoy her own individuality she sees herself as some one’s daughter, wife and mother, shunning her own identity, she therefore remarks, “I was born my father died when I was fifteen I got married to Mohan, I have two children, and I did not let a third live” (2) This last sentence directly hints at an abortion of her third child without her husband’s knowledge. She even lives up to this dedicated wife’s role at the cost of losing her own identity. Both of them are leading their life like “a pair of bullocks yoked together”. The one was pretending, as most couples do, to be happy. But in reality, in a real happily married life there is no room for hypocrisies and pretensions. The imagery of the two bullocks yoked together signifies two human beings are forced together without any choice of their own.

Mohan names Jaya as ‘Suhasini’ after marriage. ‘Suhasini’ becomes the symbol of submissive housewife, to only care and look after her children, maintain the home well in order. Shashi Deshpande condemns the scheme of changing a woman's name as the part of a marriage. It’s not changing her name but changing her identity enslaving her to the new house. She negates her own self and accepts the role of a traditional housewife. Jaya, right from day one of her marriage till now, concludes that her husband Mohan had never accepted her as Jaya (the victorious) but as he had renamed her as ‘Suhasini’ he yearned her to be soft spoken, obedient, always smiling, ready to serve etc. But, when Jaya, in their fierce verbal battle, blurts out that “Suhasini was dead; yes, that was it, she was the one Mohan was mourning... No, the fact was that I’d finally done it—I’d killed her” (121).

Jaya’s feelings of detachment from the self, experience of a personality torn due to conflicts and a sense of disorientation are nothing but an expression of neurotic conflict. Sartre’s philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* is a long analysis of individual human experiences which enables conclusions to be drawn respecting the nature of consciousness and the world and their relation. He proposes a new form of

psychoanalysis. He describes the two levels of being within human consciousness that is being -in-itself and being-for-itself. Further, he says For-itself transcends itself to posit the In-itself. That is what called as 'transcendence in immanence'. This art helps in the realization of our 'true being'. After marriage, a woman, in fact finds a split personality within herself. Jaya too has been living with this kind of split personality for the last 17 years of her married life. Suhasini had been her marital identity. Her real identity as 'Jaya' is in crisis and she feels disoriented. On a secret visit to her posh church gate house, where her marital identity as Suhasini is fixed, sees her own divided self clearly. "And now nothing seemed to connect me to this place, nothing bridged the chasm between this prowling woman and the women who had lived here. I was conscious of a faint Chagrin at her disappearance. Wasn't it me who had painfully, laboriously created her? Perhaps, for that very résumé, she could not evade me entirely, and she appeared to me only a faint wraith of herself standing near this table, hand poised over a vase of flowers?" (168). With Mohan's disappearance, she experiences a fine quivering in her abdomen, which has always been for her prelude to a panic. There is no Kamat now to assure her of her significance and sanity nor the distant relative, mad Kusum, against whom to test her sanity. Thus "her sense of confusion and turmoil meet her, with brutal force" (125). "I could feel myself gasping, drowning in the darkness, the wild, flailing, panic – stricken movements that I was making taking me lower and lower into the vortex.... Take your pain between your teeth bite on it; don't let it escape... I came floundering out of the depths, thinking --- am I going crazy like Kusum?" (125) Jaya experiences utter mental pain and confusion. Sartre prefers to stick on the human reality, the 'true' being is Subjectivity. He defines "subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and on the other, that the man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism".

It is only after she gets Mohan's telegram from Delhi informing her that everything is fine and their changed son Rahul's return, makes her think that she was silly in contemplating suicides earlier. She tells, "I'm not afraid any more, the panic has gone.

I'm Mohan's wife. I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. Now I know that kind of a fragmentation is not possible," (191) Her step in erasing 'That long silence' is towards restoring normalcy and happiness in the family. Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* (1984) asserts that no biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization that determines this creature. She entreats women to discover their own identity, the authentic and autonomous self and not the derived and reduced figure of a genderized being. It is to achieve autonomy and a concrete subjectivity or that will be much more than just being the other of the universally authenticated man.

Jaya's self-analysis reveals her the fact that she lacked courage and the right of making a choice. "The truth is that it was Mohan who had clear idea of what he wanted; the kind of life he wanted to lead the kind of home he would live in, and I went along with him. But I cannot blame Mohan, for even if he had asked me what do you want? – I would have found it hard to give him a reply." When she is in this deep thinking Maitreyee comes to her mind who so definitely rejected her philosopher husband Yajnavalkya's offer of half his property. 'Will this property give me immortality?' she asked him. 'No,' he said and she immediately rejected the property. To know what you want... I have been denied that "(25). Jaya feels if Mohan is a sinner, then she too has to accept herself as one. Heidegger says, man in despair finds himself victimised by the external forces but when he understands himself he is on the plane of nothingness and suffers dread of death and loneliness. Jaya is revaluating herself and now wants to choose her own way. She is now conscious of her will. At last Jaya realizes that she has to make a choice of her own to assert her individuality. Kierkegaard opines, "To 'exist' means choosing one's own true self; 'existence' is something to be won by choice, 'process of Becoming' and as a 'striving'." Maitreyee made a choice of her own. Sri Krishna told Arjuna in *Bhagavad-Gita* that he himself had to make his choice - *yathechchasi tatha kuru* – 'Do as you desire.' "But now I understand. With this line, after all those millions of words of instruction, Krishna

confers humanness on Arjuna. 'I have given you knowledge. Now you make the choice. The choice is yours. Do as you desire'. (192) Jaya's final choice is to erase the silence. "If I have to plug that 'hole in the heart'. I will have to speak, to listen; I will have to erase the silence between us. While studying Sanskrit drama, I'd learnt with a sense of outrage that its rigid rules did not permit women characters to speak Sanskrit. They had to use Prakrit - a language that had sounded to my ears like a baby's lips. The anger I'd felt then comes back to me when I realize what I have been doing all these years. I have been speaking Prakrit myself." (192-193). Now Jaya is out of panic. Jaya has now realized how much she has contributed to her self-destruction. Sarala Palkar says, "It is only through self-analysis and self-understanding, through vigilance and courage, they can begin to change their lives. They will have to fight their own battles, nobody is going to do it for them." By erasing the silence that had prevailed in her life for seventeen long years Jaya is asserting herself. It has been rightly said: "Emancipation means communication; it does necessarily mean identification." Jaya is totally a silent and mute sufferer. She cries "I can't hope, I can't manage, I can't go on". She is suffocated in the traditional norms set up by the patriarchal society. Jaya's introspection leads to know herself what she had made of herself and her life and that entails her way to choice. She acknowledges her mistakes and wants to erase the long silence to lead a confident life by saying "life has always to be made possible." (193). By embracing silence Jaya is confined to a meaningless existence. For 17 years she used it as an instrument in a false notion of protecting her marital life. Though she is able to survive her marriage rest is in jeopardy, her own identity. The alienation at Dadar flat shatters her psyche and triggers the process of thinking. She was at the state of Nothingness. According to Sartre "The being by which Nothingness arrives in the world is a Being such that in its being the Nothingness of its being is in question. The being by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness." The emptiness in her life probes for thinking. Jaya had an illusion of happiness. She accepts that she should let that illusion go. "I had to admit the truth to myself-that I had often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of the unchanging pattern, the unending

monotony.” (4) Jaya on her way to introspection is aware of the essentials of the critical analysis and self-detachment. Jaya always expected a change she had sighed for a catastrophe, a disaster that could pull her out of dull routine. Her self-analysis revealed her own flaws and she gradually prepared herself for facing the reality. Sartre says,

“Man first of all exists, surges up in the world and defines himself afterwards. A man as the existentialist sees him, is not definable, it is because he is nothing. He will not be anything until later and then he will be what he makes himself. Man is not what he conceives to be, but he is what he wills and makes of himself.”

Elezabeth Robins Writes – “Shashi Deshpande’s novel, *That Long Silence* announcing, as it were, the intention of this talented contemporary Indian Writer to break the long silence that has surrounded women, their experiences and their world. For a long time, the woman has existed as a gap, as an absence in the literature. Whether Western or Indian. This is not only true of the fiction created by men, but also by women, who have mostly confined themselves to writing love stories or dealing with the experience of women in a superficial manner, creating the same kind of stereotypes of women which they find so reprehensible in the writings of men. Women writers have also often fallen a pray to that prescriptive feminist ideology of creating strong women characters. This doctrine becomes as repressive as the one created by male hegemony and represses the truth about the majority of thin sister and thin lives.” Shashi Deshpande in all her novels raises her strong voice of protest against the male-dominated Indian society and against man-made rules and conventions. Thus Silence is seen as an image of subjugation, alienation, absurdity of Jaya’s existence. Erasing that long silence, she evolves as a confident and independent being.

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